NIHR | School for Social Care Research

NIHR SSCR Programme 2024-2029
Practice Evaluation Scheme

Call for Applications October 2025: Guidance for Applicants

The School for Social Care Research is inviting applications for Practice Evaluation Awards.

This opportunity is to enable practitioners in adult social care to undertake research or evaluation-based activities that aim to address a particular problem or question in their organisation.

The Practice Evaluation Scheme can fund, or part-fund, the release of staff from practice organisations in adult social care to undertake collaborative research or evaluation work with established researchers. These projects will be co-produced between social care practitioners who have comprehensive knowledge and understanding of 'front line' adult social care practice or policy issues, and researchers who have expertise in conducting robust academic research.

The deadline for applications is 5pm Friday 13th February 2026.

Aims

This funding opportunity aims to:

- Support projects that combine the strengths of academic research and practice-oriented expertise to improve the delivery or implementation of adult social care services;
- Support the professional development of practitioners working in adult social care services;
- Provide opportunities to share findings and support improved service delivery in other parts of social care or geographical areas.

This programme is designed to facilitate projects which respond to and are highly tailored to the needs of the organisation that will lead the award (the **host organisation**).

Projects will be led by a social care practitioner (the **Practice Lead**) and supported by an established researcher in a relevant subject area (the **Research Supporter**). Projects may also involve a small team based at the host organisation and/or with other project partners, including other practice organisations where there are opportunities for collaboration and / or comparative work.

Benefits of applying

For Practice Leads:

- The opportunity to lead a project to help address a key question in their organisation
- To generate findings and outputs that could support more effective service delivery in their organisation
- To develop methodological, analytical and research-related skills in ways that are tailored to their individual personal/or organisational development goals
- To scope opportunities for possible future research funding opportunities.

For employers:

- To enable research projects which directly support their work and priorities
- To build organisational capacity for practitioner-led research
- To enhance professional development opportunities for staff
- To build and strengthen networks with other service providers and established researchers working across adult social care.

For the SSCR:

- To support collaboration between academic research and social care practitioners
- To support continued professional development and research capacity building initiatives in social care organisations
- To support research which is of practical benefit in areas aligned with the remit of the SSCR and Government priorities for the future of social care.

What type of projects can be funded?

We wish to fund research or evaluation projects which address a key question around an area of uncertainty in practice or service delivery at the host organisation. For example, projects might focus on:

- Evaluating a current aspect or aspects of service delivery to aid decision-making about the adoption of future service models
- Testing the feasibility of a new practice framework or a proposed intervention to improve new policies or procedures
- Undertaking research to develop evidence-based training materials for professionals in the host organisation.

This is an **open call** but projects should align with one or more of our research themes (Annex 1). We also particularly welcome applications that align with one or more of the three Government 'big shifts' and their relevance to social care. These shifts are:

- Hospital to community;
- Analogue to digital;
- Treatment to prevention.

We also welcome proposals which include rigorous and novel methods, topic areas that are not

represented in our current portfolio of research, and research or evaluations looking at interventions targeting populations with high social care needs which have been historically underserved (e.g. black and minority ethnic participants, people with learning disabilities, people with dementia).

How much funding is available?

The SSCR has £800k dedicated to this scheme in total. We plan to make 8-10 awards between £75k - £100k each. We will also consider awards which are higher or lower in value if they demonstrate a particularly strong fit with our review criteria.

If all available funds are not distributed in this round, they will be rolled forward into a subsequent call.

How funding is managed

This funding must be issued and managed by the host organisation on behalf of the Practice Lead; we cannot issue this funding to an individual. Every application must have confirmation from someone with financial responsibility at the host organisation to verify that the organisation is willing and able to manage this funding for the full duration of the award.

If funding is successful, the SSCR will set up a funding contract outlining the key terms of the project. The host organisation will then complete a short finance report and invoice the University of York in arrears every quarter to receive the funding throughout the award.

Eligibility

To be eligible for funding, applications must:

- Be led by a named practitioner (the Practice Lead) and supported by an experienced researcher (the Research Supporter).
- Have potential benefit to the delivery of adult social care services in England. The SSCR is funded to improve the evidence base of social care in England; we are open to receiving applications from Wales, NI or Scotland but these must include some comparative work with England with benefits to services in England clearly articulated.
- Align with one or more of our research themes (Annex 1), or one or more of the three Government 'big shifts'.

If applications are focused on an intervention or practice framework, the intervention or practice must have secure funding throughout the duration of the proposed SSCR award.

Who can apply?

We welcome applications from individuals working in practice-based organisations or roles related to adult social care and the research programme of the School for Social Care Research.

Our definition of 'practitioner' is very broad and may include people who work in:

- Provider organisations delivering front-line adult social care;
- Local authorities or adult social care departments in desk-based roles;
- The voluntary sector or community interest companies.

If you are interested in applying but are unsure whether you may be eligible then please contact us via sscr@york.ac.uk.

Project Teams

The Practice Lead

The Practice Lead will be expected to take ownership of the project, its design, execution and associated reporting.

They are not expected to have a significant track record in research as this scheme aims to widen opportunities for individuals to build research skills in practice settings. It is also expected that the Practice Lead will have the appropriate guidance to do this from the Research Supporter. Up to £1000 of the proposed budget may be used towards training for the Practice Lead in relevant research methods to support the delivery of their project.

This award may be suitable for an individual early in their research career and/or to develop and early evaluation of an aspect of service delivery which might be scaled up for future research funding.

Co-applicants

Alongside the Practice Lead, this award also provides financial support for small teams of co-applicants who will support the delivery of the project. Teams of co-applicants may include project partners, practitioners at the same organisation or people with lived experience.

Teams may also include senior practitioners who may provide mentoring and support, but the project should ultimately be led by the Practice Lead.

The Research Supporter

Each project **must** include a named Research Supporter. This individual will work with the Practice Lead to design the project and provide mentorship throughout the award.

While they do not need to have existing links with the SSCR, they should be able to evidence (ie. via publications or funding record) a strong and reputable social or health care research background with relevant expertise in the project area.

Connecting with researchers

The School for Social Care Research comprises a wide network of established and experienced social care researchers in England, working across a broad range of themes and subject areas.

Prospective applicants or organisations without existing links to established researchers are encouraged to identify and engage with a member of the School who can assist with making these links (subject to capacity).

What types of activities can the funding be used for?

This funding can be used for:

- Full- or part-time salary backfill of the Practice Lead and project team. Salary costs can include National Insurance and pension contributions, and other costs usually covered by the employer.
- Research consumables that aren't currently available at the host organisation (e.g transcription costs, participant fees for focus groups/interviews, database subscription fees, etc.)
- Travel and accommodation costs for up to two people **in the host organisation** to attend the SSCR conference
- Up to £1000 for relevant training in research methods to support the delivery of the project.

We will not fund:

- Costs associated with the delivery of the intervention/framework you wish to evaluate
- Travel to or attendance at international conferences
- Salary or supervision costs for the Research Supporter without strong rationale (see below).

A small, proportional contribution towards the Researcher Supporter's time is eligible only where absolutely necessary and not doing so would mean that the researcher is unable to be named - i.e. they are an early or mid career academic on a research-only contract.

Accurate costing and budgeting is very important, and applications will be assessed on their value for money and whether the project is making sensible use of the requested funds. In the development of the project plans, the Practice Lead should work closely with the Research Supporter to ensure that costs are fully justified and proportional to the planned activity.

How long can projects run for?

Projects can last between 12 and 24 months. Project activity can begin from July 2026 following necessary contracting processes and should finish by June 2028.

We will consider applications for a shorter period if they are particularly strong, and the proposed plan of work makes sense in the context of the organisation and the strengths of the project team.

Applicants are required to complete a Gantt chart outlining the key milestones and planned

activities in their project., including timelines for obtaining necessary ethical approval for any project activity.

Expectations

For the Practice Leads/Project Teams:

- Attend at least one SSCR Annual conference during their project, where they will share a poster of their project and any associated findings.
- Produce a briefing showcasing their evaluation outcomes, which will be made available on the SSCR website.
- Explore other formal means of sharing their methods and outcomes to support replication or implementation in other practice organisations.

For the employer:

- Ensure that the Practice Lead/project team is supported by the organisation and given sufficient time in their workload to deliver the project as set out in their proposal.
- Ensure that the host organisation is willing and able to accept and manage this funding, if successful.

For the SSCR:

- Offer structured support coordinated by the School's dedicated Career Development Team. This may include invitations to training and relevant events and links with a peer support network of other awardees.

For the Research Supporter:

- Support the Practice Lead/Project team engage in appropriate data management planning and ethics approval processes at their organisation.
- Provide mentorship and guidance throughout the project.

Ethics and Governance

We expect applicants to carefully consider the necessary ethical and governance approvals for their project and broadly outline how these will be managed. For further information about whether ethics approval will be required for their project, applicants should use the Health Research Authority (HRA) decision-making tool. If ethics approval is necessary, the timelines for obtaining this should be considered in the overarching project plan.

For information more broadly about seeking ethics approval and research governance, see: https://www.hra.nhs.uk/.

How to apply

Completed application documents should be sent to sscr@york.ac.uk before the deadline of

5pm Friday 13th February 2026. Application documents must include:

- Application form
- Costings template
- Gantt chart
- Practice Lead CV
- Research Supporter CV

The application must be endorsed and signed by the Practice Lead, their line manager, the named Research Supporter and an administrative/financial authority for the host organisation. Applications must include **all** documents to be considered complete - incomplete applications will not be progressed to panel.

Application form

Applications must be submitted using the form provided which includes the following sections:

1. Applicant details
2. Practice Lead background
3. Application summary
4. Case for support
5. Resources
6. Application support
7. Declarations

Review criteria

Applications are reviewed based on the following criteria:

- Robust rationale for the planned evaluation/activity
- Fit with the NIHR SSCR Programme and alignment with one or more thematic priorities
- Strong and active role of practitioners in the development and implementation of the project
- Strong applicant profile with a commitment to their professional development
- Strong and appropriate research support
- Feasibility
- Value for money
- Clear outcomes for the study
- Potential for impact

Timeline and Funding Process

October 2025	Call launches.
October 2025 - January 2026	Applicants work collaboratively with their research supporter to develop and complete the application form.
5pm Friday 13th February 2026	Deadline for completed proposals.
March 2026	Proposals are reviewed by the assessment panel.
April 2026	Applicants are notified of outcomes. Unsuccessful applicants receive feedback and successful award letters are issued.
May- June 2026	Contracting with host organisation.
July 2026 - June 2028	Practice Evaluation awards run.

Interested in applying?

- Attend our informational webinar on Wednesday 19th November (11:30 - 12:30) where SSCR Director Professor Yvonne Birks will share more information about the scheme and host a live Q&A. Register for this webinar via Eventbrite.
- Applicants who would like to explore links with the SSCR research network can view our full membership and related research interest via the SSCR website.
- Prospective applicants who are new to research or would like additional support developing their applications are encouraged to contact the Research Support Service Specialist Centre for Social Care (RSS) for confidential advice. We are collaborating with advisors from the RSS to support

A full list of our frequently asked questions can be also found on our website. If your query is not answered here, please email us at sscr@york.ac.uk and we will be happy to help.

Appendix 1. SSCR Research Themes

The School's research programme will cover the following key thematic areas in this context of adult social care (in no priority order):

- Supporting choice and control for people to live flourishing lives: evaluation of feasibility, quality, impact and effectiveness of existing and new models of support.
- Adult social care needs (met and unmet), and prevention in its broadest sense.
- Digital and other new technologies.
- The adult social care workforce: recruitment and retention; workforce development, skills, and training; roles development and new ways of working; challenges including equality and diversity.
- Care resources management and allocation: eligibility; assessment; innovative approaches to funding; equality and value across self- and state-funded services; financial pressures facing adults needing support and their families.
- Supporting carers and volunteers.
- Communities and local area networks to promote well-being; including asset-based approaches, social prescribing; community and individual capability; personalisation; interdependency.
- Care systems and markets: local authorities management of volume and quality in local services/markets; market-shaping and the impact on providers and others; impact of major changes (e.g. legislation/policy) to systems of care; the impact of coproduced service provision.
- Diversity, inequality and communities/populations less well represented in research: covering areas such as variations in accessing adult social care; promising practice and support for specific user groups; coproducing solutions to challenge inequality.
- Adult social care at the interface with other systems.
- Appropriate development and utilisation of robust outcome measures of interest to commissioners, managers, staff, people who use services and their carers where gaps are identified.
- Analysis of cost-effectiveness of models and intervention: ensuring that resource impacts are addressed alongside outcome impacts, and that any trade-offs are transparent.
- Using routinely collected social care data and development of analytic tools and infrastructure for service planning, policy making, identifying inequalities, and measuring outcomes.
- Understanding the acceptability of using individual social care records for these purposes from user, carer, family member and professional perspectives.
- Anticipating the future: new and emerging priorities.
- Well costed and clear and directed at research-only academics who aren't able to contribute if their time isn't costed - not expected for large sums for small buy-out